



**Remarks to the City Council on the
Removal of Confederate Monuments**
City Council Chambers
December 17, 2015

In July, I came before this City Council to request the relocation of four Confederate monuments occupying prominent public spaces in New Orleans. At the same time, I asked the people of our great city to dialogue and share with each other on this subject.

And after months of individual conversations, meetings, public hearings, reflection, and prayer - this much is clear.

Feelings run deep, and although time heals all wounds, old injuries remain raw, which means they didn't heal right in the first place.

For New Orleans to move forward, we need to bring everyone together, and to do it, we must reckon with our past. William Faulkner said it best: "the past is never dead. It's not even past."

Jason Berry says it like this: "The past is messy. It intrudes like an unwanted cousin, spilling wine and gravy at the supper table. But we cannot grow as a city or a people without an honest confrontation with that messy past."

With eyes wide open we should truly remember history, and not revere a false version of it.

We should remember that the Confederacy nearly destroyed our country, and would have seen to enslaving most of our city. By maintaining reverential monuments to the cause of this Confederacy in such out of context, honored, prominent public places, we betray our full history; ignore the progress of our city and limit our future.

That is why again today on behalf of New Orleanians going back through the centuries – free and enslaved, rich and poor, white and black, creole, Native American, and so many others – let us move these divisive Confederate monuments to a Civil War park or museum. It will be here where these statues can be put into context and where the public can come to learn all of our history.

As a people, we march to freedom and liberty, from the American Revolution through the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement through to this very day. Those

who forget history are doomed to repeat it and we all should recall why these monuments were put up in the first place.

They were **not** placed in our most prominent locations as tributes to the men they represent.

Indeed, the monuments reinforce a very specific ideology, and when it comes to the true nature of this ideology, the historical record is clear. But as Charles Fenner once so eloquently stated:

“Justice is the most persistent and irrepressible of human voices. It may be smothered for a time by passion and prejudice – it may be temporarily drowned by the uproar of calumny and denunciation – but it still clamors for a hearing, and the time surely comes when it must and will be heard.” That day is now.

The Confederacy was on the wrong side of humanity. It supported and promoted a truly horrifying, twisted system built on the premise that states had the right to treat human beings as slaves.

No one who knows history can deny this; no one.

Individual Confederate soldiers, no doubt fighting bravely for a cause they believed in, nevertheless fought against the United States for a cause that was wrong. Lee led that fight. Jefferson Davis presided over it. PGT Beauregard participated in it.

If that cause had won, it would have been the end of our American experiment in democracy and liberty. And the world would be the worse for it today. Our beloved country would be unrecognizable.

Luckily, at great cost, President Lincoln and the Union forces successfully defended the Constitution and the ideals of this great nation.

And our country has gone on to be the greatest country that the world has ever known. We are exceptional, because our ideals of freedom, liberty and justice for all, are exceptional.

The monuments are just an effort to rewrite this history, to literally put the ‘lost cause’ of the Confederacy on a pedestal, and cast an oppressive shadow of exclusion over our city.

That way there could be some sense of pride for supporters of the Confederacy as they grappled with defeat and the upheaval that came with it.

The Daily-Picayune on the day of the dedication of the Robert E. Lee statue put it best, writing that: “By every appliance of literature and art, we must show to all coming ages that with us, at least, there dwells no sense of guilt.”

I believe we can do better. We deserve better and we must do it now. Dr. King spoke eloquently about why we can't wait in his letter from Birmingham jail when he said:

"For years now I have heard the word "wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." We must come to see... that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We in the South have often defined ourselves by our past—the good, the bad and the ugly. And unfortunately, we have often found ourselves on the wrong side of history—especially as it pertains to civil rights, race and equity. The South that I know and understand is better than that and holds in its bosom the best that America has to offer. Let me tell you about the South I know.

The South that represents my beliefs and those that I am sure many of us share are faith and family and country. Mine is the South made up of people gathering on front porches and at kitchen tables. It is the South of "Good Morning" and "Good Evening" greetings. Great Food, Great Music, lazy rivers. It is the South where our parents taught us the difference between right and wrong. It is the South where we lend a helping hand and a caring ear. It is the South where we were held accountable for our actions. It is the South where we learn to treat others like we want to be treated. Not just those who look like us—but ALL of us. And finally we all share love of country, Patriots one and all. Because we love freedom, we love liberty and when we are at our best we love justice.

I believe in the better parts of the South and of our Southern heritage. I believe that even in the middle of these national debates on Confederate symbols, whether you look at them with contempt or with pride, we have the opportunity to show the world that we as New Orleanians, and Southerners, are able to bring our community together around the prospect of a better future.

We believe in a better South and in a better New Orleans and a more perfect union. Where proper recollection and reverence of our collective history is one that honors our great nation and the true diversity of our history—where we overcome our past and find a better way into the future.

This is an idealistic concept, yes. But, I believe it is also our present responsibility. We cannot be deterred by the hollow arguments about the location and historic relevance of monuments placed for subversive purposes. We should have no fear or hesitation about opportunities that can move our city forward. We the people of New Orleans have the power to right these historical wrongs. This responsibility, this opportunity will not pass this way again any time soon.

Indeed, slavery was our nation's original sin and the impact of this terrible institution is still being felt today.

That is why when it comes to the monuments we can't just 'let sleeping dogs lie', because that dog wakes up every day, and bites us.

We have not resolved our age old issues and we pay the price with enduring racism and hate; inequality of opportunity; poverty that swallows our kids' promise; police community relations that are tense; violent crime that chokes neighborhoods.

In our city and nation, trust is sometimes hard to come by. We may live just blocks away from each other, but are often worlds apart.

We need to change. We can't move forward with strength if we are divided and if the past is holding us back. "A house divided against itself cannot stand."

Like cleaning a wound; this process is painful, but healing. Now we will finally have a chance to create new symbols together, as one people.

So as we look towards 2018 and our 300th anniversary as a city, let us seize the moment. Indeed, there is a lot to do, and to make our city safe, fix our streets, create good jobs, and help our kids succeed; we must be able to come together. After all, diversity is our greatest strength and only if we are united can we take on our toughest issues.

The ties that bind us together are so much stronger than what keeps us apart. We can do anything, we are Americans, we are New Orleanians, and as our greatest President Abraham Lincoln said:

"We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained/it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

Those monuments do not now, nor have they ever reflected the history, the strength, the richness, the diversity or the soul of who we are as a city. We are so much more.

So stand with the people of New Orleans and bend the arc of history towards justice. Stand with the people of our beloved city and use the power given to you - right this historical wrong.

Stand with me and make straight the path that took a wrong turn into a dark wood.

From Washington at Yorktown to Lincoln at Gettysburg, from Jackson in Chalmette to King in Birmingham, make straight the pathway to freedom and justice for all and pledge allegiance once again to the United States of America. Let us take these statues down and put them in a proper place of remembrance, not reverence.

Thank you and God bless.